

Epiphany by David Murphy

One darkening evening in the Philippines in 1996 I set out on foot from my hotel to a meeting at a home in an unfamiliar neighborhood in an unfamiliar town. I followed the directions I had been given but thought I might have passed my destination. There were no lights along the narrow, cracked streets and the pale, flickering light – electricity had not been restored following a typhoon a month earlier – that trickled from the windows of the raw cinderblock houses served more to reveal me to anyone who might be in the shadows than to illuminate my way. I saw no one after I left the main street. Even the beggar children had given over their alms, eaten their meager meals and were destroying their livers by inhaling solvents from plastic bags. English and Filipino are the official languages of the Philippines but in the provinces many of “the masses” speak little or no English and I knew only a few words of Filipino and none at all of the seventy or so regional dialects. I was wondering how I might ask for directions when out of the darkness materialized a young child, a girl, of indeterminate age, no less than six but not yet in her teens. (Lacking the shallow sophistication that comes from overexposure to mass media, children in the Philippines seem younger than their western counterparts.) I remember her wearing a simple dress of faded, thin material, although this may be a detail supplied by my imagination in the years since. I asked her about the place I was looking for and she approached me in the darkness. I do not know if my memory of a pretty, brown face framed with straight, dark hair is real or only a reasonable conjecture. I think that she pointed to a place nearby and when I was uncertain where she meant, led me there before she went on her way – it seems now that she showed me my destination

and then was simply no longer there – but I have no confidence in the accuracy of this memory. I do not remember her voice, although I seem to remember that she spoke in English, improbable as that seems. I am sure an observer in the shadows would have found nothing worthy of notice except the color of my skin. Yet, for an instant I was transfixed. Unseen winds shifted and my life, sails controlled by chance or by a helmsman unseen, changed course.

I have always been prone to digressions such as this. Thoughts that pertain in some fashion to a main idea flood in and, if I turn my attention to one of them, others append themselves to this new thought, leading to digression piled upon digression. Once, in 1974, (odd is it not, that I can reconstruct the time of an occurrence of three decades ago when I can barely recall today's date.) in Florida I borrowed a canoe and carried it, perilously tethered, on the top of my pale blue American Motors station wagon to a spot where the highway crossed a small stream. I dragged the canoe down the bank and paddled upstream until the stream became too shallow to navigate, pine woods giving way to meadows, then waded up as far as I could, seeking its sources.

My mind works that way, traveling upstream on an idea and following branch after branch of tributaries to its source. At one time, I think, I was better able to navigate the return to the mainstream of thought, tracing, correlating and unifying the separate elements, conveying to my audience an accurate and complete reproduction of the reality behind the concept, only to find them with eyes glazed with boredom or closed, or with limbs twitching in a desire to escape. Eventually I learned to keep my tributaries to myself. (It was a fortunate lesson; now I find that I often lose my way on the return to the main idea.) Each of those tributaries is part of the river and each of the digressions is part

of the whole thought. To leave anything out would be to diminish it, to leave it incomplete and therefore inaccurate, deceptive. Digressions are the essence of my story and they abound here, in parentheses, separated by dashes or simply lying unrecognized and unidentified in the body of the text, like fawns in the grass or fauns in the forest.

I am of an age where I find myself rummaging through the past, trying to find some congruence in seemingly random patterns of events and experiences that constitute my life. By serendipity I discover I have suffocated my emotions. It was inevitable, I suppose, a legacy of growing up male, a badge of honor conveyed in a bundle of nucleic-acid called a Y chromosome. In retrospect I see myself as a colorblind man walking through an art museum, knowing that he is oblivious to a world that exists just outside his perception. I feel intimations of phenomena, subtleties just beyond my grasp. I call it a legacy but I know that at some point I chose the path that led to this insensibility to life's infinite variety, great ocean depths of emotion, great Everests of desire. I know too that the forces and factors that made this choice seem the best available at the time are now too deeply interred to exhume for analysis. The streams are blocked, the weirs too dark and slippery; the sources are inaccessible. I have constructed an intellectual, analytical world; even as it disintegrates around me – “decomposes” would be entirely too organic to apply to such a mechanical invention – I cannot escape it. Like a would-be interstellar traveler seeking to escape Armageddon, I am bound as if by gravity to this world I have created. Do not be deceived; you too have created the world in which you live.

In my monochrome life there were certain experiences which are precious to me, rare in their intensity, blindingly distinct in their recollection. These are, I think, what James Joyce described as “epiphanies”, events in which the numinous quality bursts

through the specifics of the mundane and is directly perceptible. These are not so much remembered as re-experienced. They are not of a nature that permits intentional recall, at least not in their totality.

One of these epiphanies has emerged spontaneously, lodging in the midline of my body slightly below the notch at the bottom of my ribcage. Anatomically this is the region of the solar plexus, a center of nerves to the organs of the abdomen, where a blow can render a man unconscious. This is also a *chakra* point, yellow, just below the green *chakra* point, the heart *chakra*, in the middle of the chest. I want to describe it and share it, this epiphany, before it slips away again like a dream at waking.

In 1996 I was in the Philippines to develop a business. I was beginning what turned out to be a prolonged recovery from a medical condition which had affected me like a multitude of microscopic strokes. I was physically intact, but my intellect, my most prized possession, and my memory were impaired and I had lost, in order of the importance I gave them then, my profession and my marriage. Only years later, after I was better, was I able to realize the extent of my impairment. That has nothing to do with my story but it offers a pallid excuse as to why I was so extraordinarily unsuccessful in business.

I had been several times to the Philippines but I was still very much a newcomer. It is a deceptive place. You arrive in Manila to billboards and advertisements in English; people speaking a delightfully musical version of American English. Surrounded by a swarm of Japanese cars you might think yourself in a Southern California rush hour. If you are from the Southwest or maybe any large city in the U.S. you might mistake Filipinos, with their beautiful, brown faces and short stature, for Hispanics. It is easy to

forget that you are in a foreign country with its own, very different culture. It takes time to realize that your traffic jam is caused because the Filipinos, utilizing the shoulder and ignoring lane markings, should they exist, are driving five abreast along a roadway marginally adequate for three. You begin to notice and pity the plight of the ragged street children dodging traffic at clogged intersections, begging for pesos or selling miniature leis of delicate, white sampaguita, the national flower, to drape the neck of your rearview mirror and briefly infuse your air conditioned car with its heavy sweetness before turning brown in the heat as soon as you park. Later you might learn that the children are exploited by syndicates who appropriate their pitiful earnings until they are old enough to be abused in other ways. You may be overwhelmed by the honesty and generosity of strangers and then be betrayed for money by someone you trusted. You may be astounded that when confronted the Judas seems embarrassed, not for the betrayal but for you being so easily duped, appalled to discover that this apparent lack of integrity, if not the norm, is not an isolated occurrence but happens with disconcerting frequency, even among friends and families. I cringe now as I realize how naïve and ignorant I was then and remember the misunderstandings, the many mistakes I made, the offenses I committed.

My doomed attempt at business took me to Cagayan de Oro, a city on the northern coast of Mindanao, the second largest of the seven hundred islands that constitute the Philippines. The word “island”, for most of us, evokes an image of a strip of land rimmed with white sand beaches. In the case of Mindanao, “island” is used in the sense in which Great Britain is an island. It is implacably tropical with vastly forested low volcanic mountains and wide plains where large multinational companies grow much

of the world's pineapples with mechanical, assembly-line efficiency and process them in a manner only slightly more mechanical. It lies near the southern extent of the Philippine islands and being less accessible, some of the virgin forests were spared the rape that left the mountainsides of Luzon, the largest island, bare and prone to disastrous mudslides. My wife's family fortunes, depleted now as if following the plot of *The Good Earth*, derived from the export of the violated forests early in the twentieth century. Mindanao was originally settled by a people called Moros by the Spanish, fierce Islamic warriors who successfully resisted both the Spanish who came in the 1500's and created "the only Catholic nation in Asia" as the Filipinos are proud to label themselves, and the Americans who succeeded them some four hundred years later. In the mid-twentieth century Philippine authorities encouraged migration by Catholics from Luzon to the then-sparsely settled, fertile fields of Mindanao, much like the development of the Old American West a century previous, and with the same indifference to the rights and customs of the original inhabitants, American Indian or Muslim. – There are other similarities between the Philippines and the Old West. Even now one sees in lobbies of hotels, signs ineffectually asserting, "Firearms must be checked at the front desk." – The inevitable conflicts were active when I first visited Cagayan de Oro and they continue to smolder, occasionally ignited by the metastasis of Islamic fanaticism.

The Philippines is a poor country. A large segment of the population goes hungry on a daily basis. There is no government welfare system. Survival under poverty of this degree is possible only in tropical countries where shelter is required from rain and sun but not from extreme cold. An entire wardrobe may consist of one or two changes of clothing, bought used, washed and dried daily, and rubber thongs, called slippers, for the

feet. If they have enough food, a family can exist reasonably well if their roof does not leak and if their walls do not blow away with every typhoon. Electricity is not essential, although in cities ubiquitous illegal taps render the point moot, and water need only be close enough to carry. Of the poor, referred to as “the masses,” many eke out an existence by subsistence farming but land is in short supply.

This then was the context in which I set out on foot from my hotel that evening in 1996: squalor, poverty, hunger, corruption, lawlessness, political instability, a deficiency of integrity and my own inexperience. My encounter with the young girl lasted only seconds. Something extraordinary happened in an instant and then I went on. Of my business meeting I have only two memories: their skepticism, appropriate, I know now, for the prevailing lack of integrity, and my flaunting some of the few Filipino words I knew, never appreciating that in Mindanao Filipino is no more their native tongue than is English.

Of the girl herself, her clothes, her face, her voice, and of the broken, furtive street and rough houses, I have only impressions shrouded in shadows but somehow suffused with light. I was preoccupied with my business concerns. Flitting around the edges of my consciousness were images of children indoctrinated about “stranger danger” fleeing, screaming in terror, attracting a mob of irate parents and neighbors as the child, alone and defenseless, came toward me, a stranger, a giant twice her height. But when I spoke to her she approached with an utter lack of apprehension, with a natural, uninhibited grace, with innocence and trust so complete, so perfect, so vulnerable, so entirely void of any vestige of fear, of any experience of malice, that it pierced like a radiant spear through my breastbone, a sensation like an exquisitely sharp, intense, physical pain.

That is my epiphany, the experience of perfect, ultimate trust. The description is necessarily brief, for the encounter lasted only a few seconds and the experience only an instant, yet it is lodged now not in my mind but in my body, resonating as silently as a star reflected in a well.

Re-reading, I see nothing that communicates how profoundly that experience moved me, nothing of its lucid, luminous nature, nothing to convey the significance it holds for me and nothing to induce that experience in you. That is all there is.

I sense that you are wondering, “Is that it?” As in the failed telling of an incident that was falling-down funny when it occurred, I feel that I should hurriedly change the subject and hope to distract you from my foolishness but not before I tell you that your heart is not located on your left side as commonly represented. It lies largely under your sternum, your breastbone. I will not devalue my experience by resorting to a cliché such as “pierced to the heart.” Make of it what you will. I confine myself to anatomical exactitude, without interpretation.

When I began this account I had vague hopes that I might somehow be able to describe my epiphany in such a way that you might not merely read about it but experience it as I did. I was wrong. I do not regret the attempt.

I often wonder, as I inferred earlier, if there is a plan or purpose that has guided the seemingly random events that constitute my life. I have acquired, improbably and undeservedly, a wonderful and loving wife, who’s most remarkable feature is that she somehow retained the trust and innocence of a child, even after more than a decade of marriage to me.

I must mention, for it seems to capture so much about her and also because it pleases me so much to think of her that I want to prolong the moment, that should she encounter a flaw in a potato she is peeling she will not dig it out but rather will continue to pare it away until it is gone, even if only a tiny nugget of potato remains. I am happy.

I have also undertaken, in typical Filipino fashion, the care and nurture of four young children, entrusted to us by necessity by their mothers and perhaps by God. Is this part of a plan and these children the reasons why I was brought here, why I experienced such a cataclysmic disruption in the process of wasting what seemed like a satisfying and productive life? Is it possible that the epiphany itself is the primary reason I am here and this family, rather, only a precious blessing, a benefit incidental to the grace of the epiphany? Is all this just the result of my responses to random events? Or is my life to date yet another long and tortuous digression from a forgotten main topic?

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has written that Buddhist teachings identify a certain skeptical, analytical, intellectual personality as one that has great difficulty in attaining and sustaining deep spiritual insight. I read this with a shock of recognition for the description of the personality and of its consequences fits me so well. Over the years I have come to question my perceptions of this encounter. I know nothing about that child's circumstances, her family, the experiences in her short life. Was she as innocent and trusting as I perceived? Was she even, I have considered, a child prostitute, not so much trusting as worldly wise, overconfident, as children in their limited experience often are, of her ability to handle any situation? At the other extreme, was she an angel? Or did I somehow supersede the specifics of our mortal, physical existence and experience directly in her a divinity that is in all of us?

To these and many other questions I can only respond, “Possibly.” I am content to be left with what all of us may be left with, a subjective perception, or rather a memory of a subjective perception, a bright, sharp instant that felt like pain.